



Review

POLLARD, C. William. 1996. *The Soul of the Firm*.
Grand Rapids : Harper Business/Zondervan. Price: \$9.75 US.
ISBN 0-310-20103-9.

Resensent: *Bruce Wearne*
(Monash University, Australia)

Bill Pollard is company chairman of Service Masters, a company involved in health, cleaning and other contracting work which employs over 200,000 people across the globe. It is listed on the New York Stock Exchange with over 50,000 shareholders with a combined market value of \$3 billion worth of shares.

The important thing about this book for KOERS readers is that it is an apologia for the application of Christian principles in the business of profit-making. Pollard does not spiritualise profit-making but he does want to convey how his Christian understanding has changed Service Masters' approach to the "bottom line". He argues that a renewal of our understanding of who we are can function very profitably in the life of the firm, and in the life of its people who make up the firm.

"Money is like manure. It doesn't smell any better the more you pile it up", writes Pollard. "If we focused exclusively on profit, we would be a firm that had failed to nurture its soul".

The book presents a case which not only aims to change our view of what profit is, and what it is for, but it also argues that profit must be undergirded by a biblical view of who people are in their work. The book implies an awareness of basic biblical teaching about stewardship.

The layout of the book, however, may pose a problem if we are not careful. The publisher's work on the book has tried to turn Pollard's wise counsel into a series of ready-to-munch large print bites in the middle of the text. This makes it amenable to a quick read – the kind of thing you find on airport bookstalls for busy businessmen. "How to make zillions: almanacs of successful business truisms for today's jet-setting executive".

But I would suggest a careful reading of the book instead, ignoring the temptation for a quick flick. The book does not advocate a “quick Christian fix” that seems to go with the genre.

Central to Pollard’s ethics is his application of a principle that has been much discussed in recent “Reformational literature” – the Roman Catholic view of subsidiarity. This is the Papal advice, since *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, that encourages leaders in all areas not to try to do from above that which can be much better done from below. Or in Pollard’s words, “It is wrong to steal a person’s right or ability to make a decision”.

“As we empower people within the firm, we learn to delegate within a framework of authority and accountability, and we should never take back the right to make a decision. We must as leaders embrace the principle of subsidiarity” (p. 102).

As an aside, we might think of ways in which this principle might be applied with profit to the life style of Christian groups and associations. Or better perhaps, readers might have some ideas about its application to our present situation where Christians groups need to grow and consolidate – not only as business, but also as a strong association with clear goals. The principle is also there to be applied beyond the province of business.

Pollard’s book is not an academic book but it is another attempt to encourage a Christian mind and we should welcome it, read it and think about its proposals. It might help us in our businesses; it might also help us in our work in various Christian schools, associations and groups. At the same time defenders of “sphere sovereignty” – the Calvinist alternative to Roman Catholic “subsidiarity” – need to develop a much sharper critique of their own views of organisational hierarchy, as well as better understanding this view itself. It might well be that Reformed thinkers have been advocating “subsidiarity in ‘our’ own spheres” instead of developing a truly re-formed Christian approach to social organisation.